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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 KABUL 001467

SENSITIVE  
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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [AF](#)  
SUBJECT: FORGING A CAMPAIGN OF IDEAS

REF: KABUL 1398

Classified By: Ambassador Eikenberry for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

Framing the Election  
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¶1. (C) Even before the official start of the presidential election campaign season, most political observers have concluded that President Karzai will easily win re-election. Karzai is gunning for an overwhelming first-round victory by lining up endorsements from nearly all of the country's powerbrokers (reftel). However, few Afghans express satisfaction with the government's performance. More than three dozen candidates may contest the election until voting day, and yet none stand as a credible alternative. On its current trajectory, the election will result in a sizable majority of voters re-electing an incumbent with mediocre-to-poor reviews from his constituents over a large field of also-rans. This result ) and the narrative it would create in the international media and among the Afghan public ) could weaken faith in Afghanistan's young democracy and embolden political opposition groups to reject the legitimacy of the next government.

¶2. (C) To avoid such an outcome, we are pushing the candidates to frame this election less as a contest between personalities and ethno-tribal factions, and more as a public debate over ideas for the future of Afghanistan. Even if opposition candidates are unable to defeat Karzai, they may be able to champion worthy policies for the next government to implement. To date, opposition candidates have focused almost exclusively on the election process, in many cases claiming that all that stands between them and victory is fraud by Karzai's supporters. They are all overstating their viability. Unfortunately, most candidates, including Karzai, have avoided offering concise platforms or policy vision.

Listening to Afghans  
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¶3. (C) Private Afghan citizens tell us corruption, rule of law, unemployment, and the delivery of public services (electricity, infrastructure, water) are among their top concerns. We are advising all the candidates to address these concerns in their public appearances and campaign materials.

¶4. (C) Karzai has consolidated support from major political leaders and former candidates without any public commitment to pursue their (or any particular) policy priorities. We are urging all candidates, including Karzai, to go beyond offers of patronage positions and to commit their prospective governments to serious reforms, and to demand commitments to reforms before they withdraw and pledge their support to others, including Karzai.

¶5. (C) Karzai's strong instinct is to rule by a consensus of powerful personalities and mujahideen leaders ) regardless

of those individuals' politics. Recent converts to the Karzai campaign, including former candidate Anwarulhaq Ahadi and the Junbesh and Wahdat-e-Mardum parties, all endorsed Karzai without securing a public agreement on the direction of the next government. By offering their support solely in exchange for patronage positions, such erstwhile opposition leaders lost opportunities to negotiate commitments from Karzai to adopt policies in which they and their supporters claim strongly to believe.

#### Challenging Candidates To Do More

16. (C) The Afghan public already identifies several current and former candidates with specific issues and policy proposals. Former Foreign Minister Abdullah Abdullah has credibility on foreign policy and reconciliation, former Finance Minister Ashraf Ghani on financial reform and anti-corruption, former Interior Minister Ali Ahmad Jalali on security issues, and Lower House Deputy Speaker Mirwais Yaseni on improving relations between the Palace and Parliament. We are encouraging these and other political leaders to raise more specific proposals to address these issues in the campaign in as many ways as possible, including media interviews, candidate roundtables, campaign advertising, etc.

17. (C) Karzai may continue to consolidate major political factions under his banner, both before and after the election. If opposition leaders more closely and publicly associate with specific policies, they may influence Karzai to adopt reformist campaign themes and post-election policies

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as those individuals accept campaign deals for appointments in the next governments.  
EIKENBERRY